Keeping Species Off the Endangered Species List

A) Prior to 5/1/2009 the northern leopard frog was listed as an S3 (*Potentially at Risk*) in Montana. The status of northern leopard frogs was downgraded from S3 to S4 (*Common, Widespread, and Abundant*) in May 2009 by the Montana Natural Program. The reason cited for this change; "Risk to eastern Montana populations downgraded from S3 to S4 due to widespread occupancy of suitable habitat in eastern Montana during recent surveys". Collection of this data was funded (in-part) by SWG grants (Diversity Monitoring [T-037-3], Amphibian and Aquatic Reptile Survey [T-017]).

   Current occupancy information on this species was particularly timely to have following the June 2009 announcement of initial review of a petition seeking to protect the northern leopard frog throughout its range under the Endangered Species Act. *The information collected in Montana helped keep this species off the Endangered Species list; in 2011, the USFWS announced a 'not warranted' finding for the leopard frog.*

B) In July, 2007, MFWP committed to a statewide survey of black-tailed prairie dogs to garner critical information needed to; address the requirements of the statewide conservation plan, assist with regional planning efforts, provide data and comment to a recent petition to list the prairie dog, and assist in black-footed ferret recovery efforts.

   During the summer of 2008 hundreds of hours were spent collecting data in a rigorous statistically sound sampling design on both private and public lands. Complex data analysis followed and Montana now has a defensible and reliable statewide estimate of occupied black-tailed prairie dog acreage to aid in management and conservation of the species.

   Current occupancy information on this species was particularly important to obtain following the August 2007 petition to list black-tailed prairie dogs filed by Wild Earth Guardians. *The information collected in Montana helped keep this species off the Endangered Species list; in 2009 the USFWS announced a 'not warranted' finding for the black-tailed prairie dog.*

Building Relationships and Partnerships for Wildlife and Habitat Conservation

Through the work of our SWG funded Avian Conservation Coordinator working relationships have been initiated and solidified for increased bird conservation capacity. The coordinators efforts to re-vitalize the Montana Bird Conservation Partnership have resulted in numerous cooperative projects with federal land management agencies such as BLM and the US Forest Service and non-government organizations such as The Nature Conservancy, Avian Science Center and American Bird Conservancy. Projects to collect information on species for which we currently know little about such as waterbirds and golden eagles have been initiated and in some

cases completed. Projects to conserve and restore grassland and wetland habitats have been initiated and resulted in nearly a million dollars in cooperative project funding.

Conserving and Restoring Important Habitats

Cropland conversion, hay land conversion, cottonwood regeneration and cottonwood buffer project designs were finalized on the Lower Beaver Creek Conservation Easement and the Cottonwood Bend Conservation Easement. Cropland conversion, hay land conversion and cottonwood buffer projects were implemented on the Brazil Creek Conservation Easement.

The 2,528 acre rest rotation grazing system contract on the Fresno Wildlife Management Area was renewed for another 3 years during FY11. The Vandalia Wildlife Management Area continued using a prescribed livestock grazing system to enhance riparian and shrub-grassland habitats. Grazing system designs were finalized for the Cottonwood Bend Conservation Easement and the Lower Beaver Creek Conservation Easement. Original fencing for the Brazil Creek Conservation Easement was destroyed during the spring flooding of 2011 and thus arrangements have been made with the Natural Resources Conservation Service to replace these.

On the Cree Crossing Wildlife Management Area, 54 acres of native riparian habitat was rested from grazing to rehabilitate it from previous grazing practices, including winter feeding. Three hundred buffalo berry and chokecherry were planted to restore upland plant communities, and 200 willow were planted along the Milk River to help with bank stabilization. Due to the 2011 flooding, countless cottonwood tree seedlings are now growing in the riparian zones, as well as in the 11 acre designated habitat field on the Brazil Creek Conservation Easement. However, the dense nesting cover (DNC) plantings on Brazil Creek Conservation Easement were drowned by the spring flooding; therefore, DNC projects will continue to be implemented in cooperation with the Natural Resources and Conservation Service.

At the Rookery Wildlife Management Area, 65 acres of nonnative hay meadows consisting primarily of crested wheatgrass and smooth brome were broken up in the fall of 2009 in preparation for planting in 2010. These acres were seeded to grain in spring 2010 and will be farmed for two years to reduce nonnative species seed. In 2012 these acres will be seeded back to grassland habitat. Additionally, 47 acres of nonnative hay meadows were broken in 2010, in preparation for farming in 2011. Forty of these acres were seeded to small grain in the spring of 2011 and will be farmed in preparation for eventual reseeding to grassland habitat. The old irrigation pump and culverts were removed and a new irrigation pump and removable floating dock intake were purchased. A major failure in the irrigation ditch was repaired in the fall of 2010 and reseeded in 2011. These improvements will allow FWP to resume irrigation practices from the Milk River. Noxious weed control activities were carried out during the summer of 2010.

Within the Hinsdale Wildlife Management Area, 40 acres that had been summer fallowed were planted to DNC during the fall of 2010. Several food plot fields, a three acre field north of the access road, a two acre field south of the access road and the five acre field established in 2009,

were not able to be planted in 2011 due to flooding; however, these areas were maintained in order to prepare them for possible seeding in late fall or early spring.

At the Milk River Wildlife Management Area, 78 acres of dense cattail marsh were burned to reduce cattail cover and increase open water. Future water level management will be altered to prevent cattail expansion and increase wetland productivity.

A working plan was established with a local farmer to farm Cree Crossing Wildlife Management Area. The farming plan included no harvest within portions of a wheat field to provide food plots. This field will be planted to grassland habitat in the fall of 2011. The existing irrigation system was inventoried and plans have begun to rehabilitate the system. This will allow future irrigation of restoration projects around the Wildlife Management Area including shrub and tree plantings, permanent cover plantings, and food plots.

Songbird monitoring was conducted on eighteen FWP properties including six Conservation Easements, two Fishing Access Sites and ten Wildlife Management Areas. At least one Species of Concern species was detected at thirteen of these properties with a range of 1 to 10 Species of Concern species detected per property. A total of twenty different Species of Concern were documented at least once including bald eagle, loggerhead shrike, veery, Franklin's Gull, McCown's longspur and Sprague's pipit.

Acoustic bat monitoring was conducted at eleven sites on FWP properties. Little brown myotis, big brown bats, silver-haired bats and hoary bats were detected. Bat mist netting was conducted at Cree Crossing Wildlife Management Area for one night and resulted in the capture of only little brown bats.

Lentic and terrestrial reptile and amphibian surveys were conducted at twenty FWP sites and five Species of Concern were detected including Great Plains toad, plains spadefoot, northern leopard frog, greater short-horned lizard, and common sagebrush lozard. The most abundant species detected was the painted turtle. Northern leopard frogs, plains garter snakes and western chorus frogs were also abundant. Great Plains toad larvae was also detected at two sites confirming breeding on both properties. Plains spadefoots were found at three sites with reproduction confirmed at all three sites. Northern leopard frogs were found on four sites with reproduction confirmed at three of the four sites.

Eight FWP properties were surveyed for owls. Great horned owls were detected on all eight properties, eastern screech owls were detected on three properties and long-eared owls were detected on one property.

Big porcupine Creek and the Musselshell River were surveyed for great blue heron rookeries in May 2011. Two inactive rookeries totaling 9 nests and one active solitary nest were documented. Four active and one inactive bald eagle nests, one inactive golden eagle nest, two active osprey nests, and one inactive osprey nest were also documented.